

core areas may help mitigate possible financial impacts to landowners and may make the difference necessary to keep ranchers on their traditional family operations.

Another of the few actions which met USFWS requirements for "regulatory certainty" and which was praised by the USFWS in the last review was a Montana program which secured 30 year conservation easements from willing landowners to protect 100,000 acres of existing sagebrush landscapes. Easements included a grazing management plan approved by both the landowner and FWP which improved things for both the birds and the ranchers. This program was developed while a previous committee wrote the current Sage Grouse Management Plan about 8 or 10 years ago.

An NRCS program called the Sage Grouse Initiative had done great things by working with landowners to improve both grazing opportunities and sage grouse habitat. These funds could be used for matching grants to help even more landowners and could eventually replace federal funds as the Initiative is phased out in the next few years.

Several environmental groups openly admit they want an endangered listing for sage grouse to shut down grazing on public lands. A source of funding to purchase conservation easements would provide a powerful tool to help keep families on their ranches and to prevent a listing of sage grouse. Many studies and much anecdotal evidence shows proper grazing management can provide excellent conditions for sage grouse and livestock to both thrive.

Providing this long term source of funding will help protect the cattle industry from brucellosis and will help preserve our agricultural heritage and many other traditional activities and industries from a sage grouse listing. Local rural economies will benefit from more hunters spending money on Main Street as well. I encourage you to seize this opportunity to protect our Montana way of life and please do pass SB 295.